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CURRENT SUPERSTITIONS.

I.

OMENS OF DEATH.

THE article which follows is intended to form the first of a series, in which may be collected the numerous superstitions still current among the English-speaking population of the United States and Canada. Contributions toward such collection will be thankfully received and credited to senders. The locality should be indicated, as the only means of determining the extent of diffusion of such beliefs.

The basis of the present paper is a collection made by Fanny D. Bergen, to which have been added contributions by W. M. Beauchamp and W. W. Newell. The notes are by the latter.

A. *Omens connected with Funeral Ceremonies.*

1. While the corpse is in the house, the looking-glass must be turned toward the wall; otherwise, whoever looks into the mirror will die within the year. This custom is said to be most common among Irish Catholics, but is not confined to these. (Baldwinsville, N. Y.)

The elucidation of this singular practice must be reserved for a subsequent paper on Funeral Customs.

2. The clock should be stopped at the time of death, as its running will bring ill luck. (Baldwinsville, N. Y.)

Stop the clock at the time of death. (New Hampshire.)

The same custom is noted in Great Britain and Germany. The object, no doubt, is not merely symbolic, as might at first appear, but to limit the power of death, by introducing a new period of time.

3. To keep the corpse in the house over Sunday will bring death in the family before the year is out. (South Framingham, Mass.)

4. If the grave is left open over Sunday, another death will occur before the Sunday following. (Boxford, Mass.)

In Switzerland, if a grave is left open over Sunday, it is said that within four weeks one of the village will die.¹

5. If rain falls into an open grave, another burial in the same cemetery will occur within three days. (West New York.)

6. If rain falls on a new-made grave, there will be another death in the family within the year. (Baldwinsville, N. Y.; Poland, Me.)

A common saying, in England, is "Happy is the corpse the rain falls on."² This belief exists also in the United States. Thus,

¹ Wuttke, *Die Deutsche Aberglaube der Gegenwart*, Berlin, 1869, p. 200.

² Gregor, p. 90.

it is said that if rain falls at the time of the funeral, it is a sign that the dead has gone to heaven. (Boston, Mass.) The method of conception is the same as that apparent in the two superstitions above enumerated, but the sign is interpreted in a different manner.

7. If a hearse is drawn by two white horses, death in the neighborhood will occur within a month. (Central Maine.)

If a white horse draws a hearse, another death will soon follow. (Poland, Me.)

In Bohemia, also, white horses are regarded as warnings of death, though to have a white horse in the stable is also said to bring good luck.¹ To dream of a white horse is a sign of death both in the latter country and in England.² In Sussex, white animals, mysteriously appearing at night, are said to be death warnings.³ In the lore of the English peasantry, white horses play an important part, and are variously considered as of good and evil portent, a fact which is plausibly accounted for on the ground that these beliefs are inherited from a time when pagan deities were considered to ride on white horses. Thus in Shropshire, Saint Milburga so rides, as Saint Walburga does in the Tyrol.⁴ Tacitus mentions the spotless white horses, reared in sacred groves by the Germans of his own day, from whose neighing auguries were taken.⁵

In Bohemia, death is considered as a white woman (survival of the death-goddess Morana), whose apparition is a sign of death to the seer.⁶ This explains why, in England and Germany, seeing a white woman is of fatal augury. The original idea doubtless is, that the goddess appears to and selects those whose society she desires. That she should be clad in white indicates her deity; for white, as the color of light, is emblematic of heaven. According to these considerations, it would seem that the presage of a white horse may rest upon the character of such animal as emblematic of the divine being who summons a mortal to the other world. Should this be really the case, much philosophy and much history would be embodied in a superstition apparently frivolous.

It may, however, be thought that there is a simpler interpretation of these omens, — namely, their connection with the custom of robing the dead in white. Thus Artemidorus, in a work on the interpretation of dreams, written in Rome in the second century, considers that to a sick man a dream of white garments is ominous of death, “because the dead are buried in white raiment; but black

¹ Grohmann, *Volksglaube in Böhmen und Mähren*, Prag, 1864, p. 53.

² C. S. Burne, *Shropshire Folk-Lore*, London, 1883, p. 264.

³ *Folk-Lore Record*, 1878, p. 54.

⁴ J. Krainz, *Mythen und Sager aus Tirol*, 1880, p. 79.

⁵ *Germania*, ch. x.

⁶ Grohmann, p. 6.

clothes signify recovery, because not the dead, but mourners use such apparel. This comes very near the notion of the Sussex peasant, above related. In the opinion of the writer, however, it would be a mistake to exclude the higher conceptions already referred to from the associations suggested by white. But the symbolism of color is too extensive a theme to be now considered.

It may be remarked that it is not only in the north of Europe that the messenger of death is represented as riding. Readers will remember that the horse of Death is mentioned in Revelation. In Greek symbolism the deceased person is often represented as riding forth on his journey, conducted by a genius. A modern Greek ballad changes Charon the ferryman to Charos the horseman; the young walk before him, the old behind, young babes are carried on his saddle.

8. It is unlucky to pass through a funeral, either between the carriages or the files of mourners on foot. (Boston, Mass.)

This is a general superstition. The custom, which has become instinctive with many persons, is usually set down to the score of decency and propriety.

9. If any one comes to a funeral after the procession starts, another death will occur in the same house. (Ohio.)

10. Whoever counts the carriages at a passing funeral will die within the year. (Peabody, Mass.)

11. The corpse must not pass twice over any part of the same road. (Baldwinsville, N. Y.)

12. The funeral procession must not cross a river. (Baldwinsville, N. Y.)

"I was first led to notice the superstition about crossing a river, from having to attend funerals on the south side, when they would otherwise have been held on the north side. This is losing ground, owing to the frequency of crossing to reach the cemetery, but I had an instance only last spring." W. M. B.

13. It is unlucky, in a funeral, for those present to repass the house where death has occurred. (Baldwinsville, N. Y.)

14. At a funeral, entering church before the mourners means death to some of the entering party. (Boston, Mass.)

15. If one dies, and no *rigor mortis* ensues, it indicates a speedy second death in the same family.¹

The superstition prevails in Great Britain and on the Continent of Europe.²

16. The person on whom the eyes of a dying person last rest will be the first to die. (Boston, Mass.)

¹ Article on "Omens of Life and Death," *Harper's Bazar*, May 14, 1887.

² Gregor, *Folk-Lore in the North-east Counties of Scotland*, London, 1881, p. 211; Grohmann, p. 189.

This seems to be a form of a widely prevalent superstition, that if the eyes of the dying person open of their own accord, one of his relatives will soon follow.¹ It is probable that the importance, from time immemorial, attached to the ceremony of closing the eyes of the dead has for its foundation not merely the natural propriety of a decent usage, but also a belief kindred to the above.

17. The last name a dying person calls is the next to follow. (New Hampshire.)

B. *Actions regarded as Ominous of Death.*

18. If three persons look at the same time into a mirror, one will die within the year. (Peabody, Mass.; New Hampshire.)

19. To break a looking-glass is a sign of death in the family before the year closes.

To break a looking-glass is a sign of death, or of bad luck for seven years. This is quite a general belief. Domestic servants, and particularly superstitious persons, are often thrown into a panic by accidents of this sort. (Niagara Falls, Ont.)

“In Clun Forest (as in Scotland) such a breakage is said to be a death token; in North Shropshire it means seven years’ trouble, to which, in Cornwall, is added, but no want. It adds to the ill luck to preserve the broken pieces. At Wellington, any one who breaks a looking-glass will never have any luck till he has broken two more — a rule, however, which seems to apply to all breakages. ‘When I have broken three I shall have finished.’ The folk say, ‘the third time pays for all.’”² In Switzerland, when a mirror breaks, he is said to die who looked in last. In Bohemia, it means seven years’ distress.³

20. If, during sickness, a pair of shears be dropped in such a manner that the points stick into the floor, it indicates the death of the sick person. (Central New York.)

In Greece, if a pair of scissors is left gaping on a table, it is said that the Archangel Michael’s mouth is open, ready to take the soul of some member of the family.⁴

21. To dance on the ground indicates disaster, or death within a year. (Boxford, Mass.)

As such dancing has been a universal custom, it seems fair to conclude that this superstition is local and modern; the informant, however, an elderly person, avers that she has always heard it so said.

¹ Haltrich, *Zur Volkskunde der Siebenbürger Sachsen*, Vienna, 1885, p. 308; Grohmann, p. 189.

² Burne, p. 281.

³ Wuttke, pp. 198, 199.

⁴ *Folk-Lore Journal*, 1883, p. 220.

22. If thirteen sit at table, the one who rises first will not live through the year. (Somerville, Mass.)

If thirteen sit at table, the last one who sits down will not die that year. (Brookline, Mass.)

This superstition is universal in Europe. In Germany, the victim is variously said to be the youngest, the last who sits down, the one who sits under the mirror, the first to eat or arise, the one who seems sad and downcast. In Tyrol, by way of exception, the augury extends only to ill luck. In one Bohemian town it is held to be true only for a Christmas festivity, and the fate is extended to all over the number of twelve. In a recent newspaper, an account was given of a dinner in the interior of the State of New York, where the omen was supposed to be averted by dividing the guests among two tables. In the Netherlands it is said that the one who sits under the beam is a traitor; a statement which points to the Paschal Supper as the origin of the belief; and this is certainly probable, while other explanations are not worth citing.¹

23. A dish-cloth hung on a door-knob is a sign of death in a family. (Deerfield, Mass.)

It is a common practice to indicate death by tying a piece of crape to the door-knob of the house, whence probably the omen.

24. If a hoe be carried through a house, some one will die before the year is out. (Mansfield, Ohio.)

The same superstition is found in England. "It is most unlucky to carry an axe, or any sharp tool, on your shoulder through the house, as it is a sign of the death of one or more of the inmates. Some extend this omen to *any* tool carried on the shoulder through a house. At Pulverbatch and Wenlock a spade is the fatal implement; it is a certain sign that a grave will shortly be dug for some member of the household." The editor observes that coffins were formerly carried "shoulder-high."²

25. Whoever works on a sick person's dress, he or she will die within the year. (Massachusetts.)

26. To put on the bonnet or hat of one in mourning is a sign that you will wear one before the year is out. (Peabody, Mass.)

To tie on a crape hat or bonnet is a sign of mourning before the year is out. (Niagara Falls, Ont.)

Don't try on a black bonnet, it means death.

27. When a woman who has been sewing puts her thimble on the table as she sits down to eat, it is a sign that she will be left a widow, if she marries. (Central Maine.)

¹ See C. Haberland, "Ueber Gebrauche und Aberglaube beim Essen," Z. f. *Völkerpsychologie*, 1888, p. 357. For the Netherlandish belief: Wolf's *Wodana*, cited in Thorpe, *Northern Mythology*, London, 1851, iii. p. 332.

² Burne, p. 280.

28. If you sneeze on Sunday morning before breakfast, you will hear of the death of some person you know before the next Saturday night. (Northern Vermont.)

Exactly opposite seems to be the omen of the Devonshire rhyme:—

Sneeze on Sunday morning fasting,
You 'll enjoy your own true love to everlasting.¹

Similar in force is an American saying for the benefit of children: "The little bird that sings in the morning, the old cat will eat before night." It is said to children who are particularly merry: "You will cry before night." The notion perhaps rests partly on the observed fact of the reaction of excitement, partly on a popular doctrine of averages, as we say that a mild winter is followed by a cool spring.

29. Lie down on a table, and you will die before the year is out. (Mattawamkeag, Me.)

30. If one sings at a table while the family are eating, it means the death of a friend. (Webster City, Iowa.)

In Bohemia it is said that if a boy sings at table he gets a vixen for wife.²

31. A baby should not look into a glass before it is a year old: if it does, it will die. (Deer Isle, Me.)

Hold a baby to a looking-glass, he will die before he completes his first year. (Massachusetts.)

This has been a general belief among mothers and nurses in the United States and in England; but in Germany the same act is said to make the child proud.³

32. To raise an umbrella in a house is a sign of an approaching death. (Pennsylvania.)

To open an umbrella in the house is a sign of ill luck. An action of this sort seriously disturbed a friend of the informant, an American girl of good family. "I would never dare to do that," she said. (Niagara Falls, Ont.)

In Shropshire it is held to be unlucky to open an umbrella in the house, especially if held over the head, when it becomes a sign of death.⁴

C. Omens from Physical Experiences.

33. When you shiver, it means that some one is walking over the place where your grave is to be. (General.)

34. Ringing in the ears betokens death. (Peabody, Mass.)

¹ W. Jones, *Credulities Past and Present*, London, 1880, p. 543.

² Grohmann, p. 226.

³ Brand, *Popular Antiquities*, ed. Hazlitt, iii. p. 172; Bartsch, ii. p. 53.

⁴ Burne, p. 280. So in Portugal, of a parasol: C. Pedroso, *Contribuições para uma Myth. pop. Port.*, in *Il Positivismo*, iii. No. 326.

Ringing in the ears means death before the week ends.

James Hogg (the Ettrick Shepherd) alludes to this superstition:—

“O lady, ‘t is dark, and I heard the dead-bell,
And I dare na gae yonder for goud nor fee.”

The poet adds a note: “By the dead-bell is meant a tinkling in the ears, which our peasantry in the county regard as a secret intelligence of some friend’s decease.” He relates how when he was otherwise unable to prevent his serving-maids from undertaking a nightly expedition, he took a drinking-glass, and, approaching the door of their chamber, passed his finger round it in such a way as to produce a tinkling sound. This had the desired effect, both women agreeing that they had never heard the dead-bell so distinct (“the dead-bell,” said one, “went through my ears with such a knell as I never heard”), and also averring that they had never known before of two hearing it at the same time. “I warrant,” cried one of the maids, “that it is my poor brother Wat: who knows whart the wild Irishes may have done to him?”¹ It is curious that the same death-token is mentioned in Portugal,² while the experience is usually interpreted in a different manner.

The same phrase is used in New England. Thus, it may be said by a country woman: “Oh! I have a death-bell!” or, “What a death-bell in my ear! You will hear of a death before the week is out.” In case of a sudden death, such a person might say: “I am not surprised; I heard a death-bell on such a day.”

D. *Miscellaneous.*

35. If a clock long motionless suddenly begins to tick or strike, it is a sign of approaching death or misfortune.

In Shropshire, if a bell rings of its own accord, it is said to forebode a death.³

36. The hearing, in the wall, of the “death-watch” or “death-tick” betokens a death in the house. (Universal.)

A maid who is superior to superstition informs the writer that this sound is only the noise of two spiders who strike against each other in the wall. It is said that the real death-tick must tick only *three* times on each occasion.⁴ The German name is “*Dodenvagel*,” death-watch.⁵

37. The hearing of three raps is a sign that some member of the family is dead. (Boston, Mass.)

¹ Notes to “The Pedlar,” in *The Mountain-Bard*.

² *El Folk-Lore Andaluz*, Seville, 1882, p. 64.

³ Burne, p. 280.

⁴ Harland and Wilkinson, *Lancashire Folk-Lore*, London, 1867, p. 152.

⁵ Strackerjau, *Aberglaube und Sagen*, Oldenburg, 1867, i. p. 35.

In Scotland it is said that these three knocks, which are a token of death, should be heard at regular intervals of one or two minutes' duration. The sound is dull, heavy, and unmistakable. In Germany, knockings in the wall or in the bed have a similar significance.¹

The original idea is that the spirit of Death, by these raps, is knocking for admission. It is probably not without reference to the superstition that Horace writes of Death as knocking equally at the door of the rich and poor.

An anecdote will illustrate the force of the belief. An American woman described the omens by which a disaster to her family had been, as she thought, foreboded. Some months before the event, in moving, a mirror had been broken; afterwards, the sheets became red as if sprinkled with blood, and finally, as she was sitting at her work, she suddenly heard a loud noise, as if some one had bounced against the outer door of the house. She went to look, and saw nothing. It should be remarked that the red color of the sheets was due to a little fungus (*Monas prodigiosa* of Ehrenberg), which is developed in starch set aside, etc., and which has derived its former Latin name from the character of prodigy which popular superstition attached to its appearance.

38. If sparks are left (unintentionally) in the ashes over night, it is a sign of death. (Cumberland, Md.)

The idea appears to be the same as that of the Shropshire saying: "It is unlucky to turn coals over when poking a fire, for then you turn sorrow to your heart."²

39. If coals fly out of the fire, in the direction of a person, it is a sign of a death concerning the person toward whom it flies. (See Rhymes in "Notes and Queries," below.)

So in Shropshire. But in Prussia and Bohemia the same thing is said to mean a visit.³

40. To see a coffin in the candle is a token of death. (Boston, Mass.)

Our authority considers a coffin in the candle to be the black cinder, which sometimes forms a separate flame near the main one, and can be snapped off with the finger.

41. If the candle burns blue it is a token of death. (See "Notes and Queries," below.)

As for the fire to burn clearly is a sign of joy, dim flames are an omen of disaster. The blue flame of a candle is held to indicate the presence of a spirit. Thus Shakespeare makes Brutus exclaim, as the ghost of Cæsar enters, "How ill this taper burns!"

¹ Gregor, p. 202; Strackerjau, i. p. 35.

² Burne, p. 275.

³ Burne, p. 275; Wuttke, p. 198.

In Germany, fire with clear flame means joy.

42. Three lighted lamps in a row are a sign of death in the house. (Eastern Massachusetts.)

Usually of a wedding. In Derbyshire a funeral, but in Durham greatness. In Germany they indicate a bridal or funeral.¹

43. Three horses of the same color indicate death, but this sign is not very noticeable in a thickly settled community. (Baldwinsville, N. Y.)

44. If a sudden and unaccountable light is seen in a carpenter's shop, it indicates that the carpenter will soon have to make a coffin. (Cape Breton.)

A carpenter generally knows when a death is about to take place, for he hears about him movements and cracking of boards.² This is the "wraith" or genius of the fated person, who is particular about selecting proper timber for the coffin.³

45. When bread, in baking, cracks across the top, it means death. (Ohio.)

Cracks on the top of a loaf of bread indicate the death of a dear friend. (Several localities.)

The baking of bread being necessary to domestic life, it was formerly invested with almost a religious significance, and the events of family history were augured from its outcome, as appears from numerous survivals. In Shropshire, according to testimony given at an inquest, a husband, during the absence of his wife, went to take the bread out of the oven. Finding it cracked at the top, he immediately set out in search of his help-mate, concluding that a fatality had befallen her, which proved to be the case. The same omen is regarded as betokening death or misfortune in many districts of Germany; whereas, if cracked below, a birth is indicated. These auguries may cause a smile; but, from a historical point of view, their significance is profound.⁴

46. If window-shades fall down without being molested, it is a sign of death. (Cape Breton.)

47. The dropping of a hair-pin from the hair indicates losing a friend. (Bucks County, Pa.)

48. It is a sign of death to see a flower blossoming out of season, as, for example, a rose in the fall. This has proved a true omen in several cases, according to the experience of a lady who believes in these signs. In consequence of this belief, when she has seen such a

¹ Burne, p. 275; Henderson, p. 111; Wuttke, p. 198.

² Bartsch, *Sagen, Märchen, und Gebräuche aus Mecklenburg*, Berlin, 1889, ii. p. 95.

³ *Folk-Lore Journal*, 1888, p. 243.

⁴ Burne, p. 275; Wuttke, p. 199; Strackerjau, i. p. 34.

flower, she will pick it off the stem and throw it away, without mentioning the incident to any one. (Niagara Falls, Ont.)

Fruit-trees blossoming out of season, or a single fruit left on a tree when the rest have been gathered, mentioned among English death-tokens.¹ In Oldenburg, Germany, if a fruit-tree bloom in the fall, or put forth new leaves, it indicates the death of an inmate of the house. The blooming of a rose in fall has the same meaning. Sometimes it is only a white rose which is regarded as thus significant.²

49. Deaths do not come single, but if one of a family dies, a second death in the same family will occur within a year. (Cambridge, Mass.)

This belief is entertained by very intelligent persons, and is defended as being sustained by experience. After a decease, intelligence of a second death will be expected ; and if, during the year, a relation of the afflicted family is taken away, it will be said, "It was so and so, then," as if a prophecy had been fulfilled in the person of the latter. It is said to be a belief among train-hands, that one accident on a railroad will be followed by a second. Firemen, in cities, regard certain corners of street, as especially fated, and do not pass them without foreboding. The method of thinking out of which these expectations grow might be expressed mythically, as if Death, having found his way to a certain household, is more likely to arrive a second time.

50. Death takes place at ebb tide. This is a general belief along the coast of New England.

The same superstition prevails along the sea-coast of Great Britain, and is here included as belonging to that system of ideas and expectations embodied in this article. Readers will remember the use made of it by Charles Dickens in "David Copperfield."

The belief also obtains in Portugal.³

It is probable that the omens which have been enumerated in this paper form only a small part of those still surviving in the country. In many respects, these have the characteristics of a true folk-lore ; with few exceptions, they are not the débris of various European systems of tradition, not obtained from recent immigrants, but, on the contrary, remains of beliefs imported by early English settlers, and for centuries received in America. They are held in many places, and common to many persons ; they still continue to influence action and expectation. Nor are they confined to unrefined and ignorant persons ; many a man, who considers himself superior to such

¹ Burne, p. 296.

² Strackerjau, i. p. 27.

³ Pedroso, *op. cit.*, vol. iv. No. 123.

fancies, and has probably never heard of their existence, will be surprised to find that some of them are still received by members of his own family, and have had something to do with the formation of their habits.

Although the importance of the study of superstitions is admitted, and has already served good purpose in the hands of historians of human thought, yet the psychological relations of these beliefs, and the theories which should be applied to their interpretation, are far from being fully elucidated. In order to make the subject clear, the first requisite is complete collection. In this branch of research, a great abundance of material is necessary in order to arrive at any correct conclusions. Above all things, hasty generalization is to be deprecated. Nothing can be accomplished by general speculation, or by discussion of popular beliefs as if they formed a consistent whole. The only possible way of establishing anything is to take each fact separately, and trace it historically and comparatively through the extent of its diffusion. Even where a popular tradition has already been reported in one locality, it is probable that its record in another region will add some additional circumstance, or some new phraseology, which may be of essential importance in determining its relation to the traditions of other countries, and so to its illustration. When a sufficient number of individual cases shall have been successfully explained, then the general principles applying to the whole subject will appear of themselves. Although the lore of the English-speaking race in America has been imported from the old country, yet it will be found that this lore will often contain something which is not matter of record in Great Britain, and will assist in forming the complete chronicle required for successful research.

Among classes of superstitions, which will hereafter be objects of consideration, and respecting which information is desired, are (1) children's superstitions, (2) superstitions concerning good and ill luck, (3) concerning marriage, (4) concerning wishes, (5) concerning the moon, (6) nurses' superstitions, (7) weather superstitions (weather-rhymes, etc.), (8) superstitions concerning animals and plants.¹

¹ This last material forms the subject of a series of articles on "Animal and Plant Lore," by Mrs. F. D. Bergen, now in course of publication in the *Popular Science Monthly*.